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International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

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## Writing Sample

Jan-Willem Anker

Includes "Blue signalling silver," "Beard," "Hungry Fish," "The Keyboardist," "In The South" and "The Neighbour Opposite."

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**Jan-Willem Anker**  
**POEMS**

**Blue signalling silver**

High-frequency crickets transmit  
from the tree line, waste bins  
bulge, alley cats, an anthill.

The great hydro pylons striding  
over dormant fields and bungalows  
clustered agaves dress the roadside.

Seaside, later, blue  
signalling silver, bronzed little skiff  
clouds haul toward the horizon.

Men rake up a cartload of kelp  
water plaits pressed sand  
rime of salt on the bodies baking.

Sea froth dispersing to flakes in the dusk  
upsurge of spume, like a dust cloud backlit  
it keeps sliding away.

Evening collapses into dreams  
jellyfish slur past in the shallows  
phantoms of liquid glass.

As it gets dark  
nails advance on my skin  
a dull surf, the beach is blank.

**Beard**

Morning, noon, night, morning, the stubble pins through your cellulitic jaw, a beard beards your mug and keeps coming, runs wild despite you. A thing within you approaching completion without you. Mesmeric.

Someone tells of his father buying a dead matador's uniform. He'd washed out the bloodstains, helped his son into it, and photographed him like that.

Your face will be pine forest by morning; picture stables in Spain where fighting bulls loll in uneasy sleep. The arena dark, deserted still.

**Hungry Fish**

The smell of insecticide drifts through the train; you know this section of branch line by heart, can tell when the job-site lights have been shifted down track.

Inside your mobile swims a goldfish — the goldfish is you. You're morphing greedily, by stages, into a yellow monster. Without you in the game peace might obtain. But what game is peaceful, exactly?

Whatever, you're famished. There is no winner, no opponent to vanquish. Only a point score. You're showing well, or not at all — who but you would know?

## The Keyboardist

Deserted stillness past midnight; mouse carcass drifts up at you on the kitchen air. The smell wafts out from behind the fridge where the animal died of hunger, or chewed through wiring. You think of the keyboardist you'd seen performing in a band from around here.

Like she was taking dictation at a rolltop desk, writing up the minutes from a meeting about music. The relation between the tones produced and her fingerpads on the synth's keys lost. Music emanating direct from her hands rather than the machine's workings.

When not required to play she'd disappear back in the wings. From that obscurity—a space like a Sunday warehouse, dark arena—she'd wait for her cue to perform again.

Her bandmate—she'd missed this—had hung his guitar, for kicks, from the overhead rigging. The sound guy hurled protestations down from the balcony seats.

Before the closing number began, the keyboardist secluded herself, as before, in the shroud of black curtain; then, again, picked her way down stage after the gig. Her face cinched up, drew to a point. Standing very still, she sought out a halo of that hall's spot-lit space; it held her gaze.

### In The South

From this milk-run bus I watch helicopters do a fly-over,  
seeding the sky with paratroopers like jellyfish  
that sway toward their drop point, only later

a citadel, off-shore, in afternoon's light show  
couples photographing themselves, as couples and alone  
men in leather jackets, their girlfriends in pumps.

Kids' voices flash from the basketball court,  
pneumatic drill, honking, clog of excavation trucks,  
a motorbike going full throttle. I can see

the athletics oval, its track and empty bleachers,  
the pier, its local fishing fleet tied in the slips  
and the island fortress out in the bay, inaccessible relic.

On the quay sits a pedestal missing its monument,  
scratched with the names of people unknown to me  
dates conjuring thoughts of other places.

Boys playing backgammon at sidewalk café tables,  
the girls with iced lattes, this year's sunglasses  
sphinxes posing their riddles each to the other

cinched parasols, muzak from the pavilion  
speakers where old men are recovering  
after a half-hour breaststroke along the buoy-line.

The wind's getting up, ruffles my hair  
I sip at the air and it's shot through with shellfish  
light like a blindfold, gusts of sudden warmth

White glare—the sea outshines the limits of itself  
the deep green like water colour washes to turquoise  
transforming soft slaps in among the rocks.

At some point the sun will sink behind a backdrop  
of mountains, broad-shouldered in the mist  
the birdless light draining away with it.

**The Neighbour Opposite**

From behind the fence wall  
suddenly the woman pulls

her blinds towards her  
the Siamese darts forward

out of the darkness of the room  
a shadow that doesn't move

then she herself follows in her housecoat  
puts her hands on the window-panes

finger by finger by finger  
as if placed under house arrest

it leaves a greasy glove print  
when she turns to the cat

her lips mold themselves to  
the contours of a word

our glances happen to graze each other  
then re-enter our quieter rooms.

*Translated from the Dutch by Ken Babstock (with the help of Liedewij Hawke)*